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EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALISM ¹

By RÉGIS MICHAUD

Was Emerson the leader of New England Transcendentalism? Was he really a Transcendentalist himself? Generations of scholars and historians have so well agreed with the general public to link together Emerson's name with Transcendentalism, that to challenge Emerson's rights to the title seems a paradox. Here comes however Professor Girard with a new definition of the movement which leaves Emerson practically out of it.

Professor Girard's arguments against Emerson are the following. Emerson is not a true Transcendentalist, because he had no system and was more a poet than a philosopher; because his rationalism "did not allow reason to take any interest in matters pertaining to the heart, nor conscience in what concerned society," because of his platonic cast of mind, his egotism and indifference to practical reforms and reformers. Moreover, before Emerson published *Nature* (1836), Transcendentalism had found in Channing its most original and definite expression which was "essentially religious." Brownson and Ripley, with Channing, are "the soul" of Transcendentalism and not Emerson.

Of the last argument we dispose in a paper on *Transcendentalism in history*.² To answer Professor Girard's indictment of Emerson is the object of the present discussion.

Let us first remark that Professor Girard's case against Emerson is none too clear. Emerson is taken with Thoreau (p. 382) as representing Transcendentalism under its philosophical aspect, only to be denied that honor in the following pages. We read of Emerson (p. 395 note 4): "He certainly

¹ *Du Transcendentalisme considéré essentiellement dans sa définition et ses origines françaises* par William Girard, University of California press, 1916.—*Emerson, a statement of New England Transcendentalism as expressed in the philosophy of its chief exponent*, by Henry David Gray, Stanford University, California, 1917.—For a general discussion of Professor Girard's thesis see Woodbridge Riley: *Two types of Transcendentalism in America. The Journal of Philosophy* May 23, 1918. See also Professor A. Schinz in *American Journal of Psychology*, Jan. 1918, Vol. XXIX, pp. 50-65.

² Forthcoming in *Modern Philology*.

was a Transcendentalist, since he makes of intuition a source of knowledge," while on page 481 note 56 we find that: "Emerson was not properly speaking a Transcendentalist." Of Transcendentalism Emerson had a first hand knowledge (p. 389) but (p. 383 note 2) of the Transcendentalists Emerson was "only the most distinguished disciple, although very unfaithful a disciple now and then." Emerson was "only an idealist at odd times." That Emerson was, to some extent, a disciple of Channing can be supported, but who are the other Transcendentalists whom Emerson followed like his masters? Were they Ripley, Brownson, Emerson's contemporaries, or Parker his own disciple? Professor Girard does not say. Nor does he state what day and what moment of his life Emerson ceased to be an idealist.

To show Emerson's aloofness from the Transcendentalists brotherhood, Professor Girard quotes from the famous lecture on the *Transcendentalist* where Emerson, taking for a while the point of view of the objectors, writes of the Transcendentalists that: "They are not good citizens . . ." A reference to the lecture will show that the contention here is not Emerson's but that of the public and Emerson answers it in what follows.

The secret of Professor Girard's animosity to Emerson is **not far to seek**. Those who have laid stress on the German origin of the movement are the same, according to him, who take Emerson for the leader of Transcendentalism. For Professor Girard one cannot be a Transcendentalist in the sense of Emerson without being suspected of German sympathies. Emerson becomes, from that fact, a stumbling block to the theory of French influence. Hence the ostracism against him.

Has not Emerson also been the victim of Professor Girard's strained classifications and divisions? To emphasize, as his right was, French influence, Professor Girard insists on the religious aspect of Transcendentalism, but cannot deny that it had also a philosophical aspect. Neither on this point does it seem that Professor Girard has made his views very clear. Have there really been two successive and distinct phases of New England Transcendentalism, one religious up to 1835, represented by Channing, the other one philosophical after that date?

Professor Girard himself is not very sure of the fact but he makes the statement "for the sake of exposition," a statement which he finally takes for granted. But how can Ripley, Brownson, Parker who, chronologically, belong to the second

period, be brought to testify in the first? And how can Ripley and Brownson, Emerson's contemporaries, represent "the soul" of Transcendentalism under its religious aspect against the author of the *Divinity School address*? Had not Emerson, himself a well known preacher and lecturer, his own Transcendental philosophy of religion, not to be dismissed without a thorough inquiry and discussion?

If New England Transcendentalism had, as stated by Professor Girard, a second and philosophical period, after 1835, who represented it besides Emerson?

Is Emerson, to be excluded from Transcendentalism, offered a fair treatment by Professor Girard when we read as unconvincing an argument as the following on "the little influence Emerson had on the men of his time" (p. 395 note 4)? Is it fair to recall that only 500 copies were sold of *Nature*, Emerson's first and anonymous book, while his different addresses and lectures since 1834 stirred the New England public, as recorded in particular by Lowell and Holmes after hearing Emerson's lecture on the *American Scholar*, that "intellectual Declaration of Independence" according to Holmes? (See Emerson's Works, Centenary Edition I p. 415).

II

Let us accept, for the sake of argument, Professor Girard's views of Transcendentalism under a double aspect, the first "essentially" religious and the second philosophical, and let us see how Emerson stands, in both cases, as a true Transcendentalist.

If Transcendentalism consists primarily, as advanced by Professor Girard, in the recognition of an autonomous religious faculty, in transferring authority from outside inside and rebuilding religion on the basis of ethics, we do not see well how Emerson can be denied the name of a Transcendentalist.

If, between 1825 and 1835, Transcendentalism in New England had but a religious aspect, it had no other for Emerson himself, judging from his recently published Journals (ignored by Professor Girard), from the time Emerson enters the Unitarian pastorate (1826) to the *Divinity school address* (1838).³ As the foundation of religion, Emerson puts the moral sense which for him is supreme. Emerson refers all religion to the test of individual experience. The foundations of religious belief are in the inner sense which no criticism,

³ On the subject of Emerson's philosophy of religion see, besides his addresses and the Journals for 1832-1838, Cabot, *A memoir of R. W. Emerson*, pp. 298-348.

historical nor critical, can affect. "The inmost soul is God" (J. II, p. 525). That is the summary of Emerson's religious doctrine and the result of his religious evolution. We find in it his favorite theory of self-reliance as expressed in an autobiographical poem of 1832, at a time when Emerson tried to find his way between the teachings of Unitarianism and the appeal of "the still small voice" within himself:

"Who says the heart's a blind guide? It is not.

From God it came. It is the Deity." (J. II, 519) . .

Of *self-reliance* we find the origin in Emerson's true and practical Americanism, in his liking for initiative and freedom.

Self-reliance is for Emerson a declaration of spiritual independence, a plea for religious autonomy. To keep the soul forever young and active, to defend its creative energies, the personal and actual character of religious experience, the right for the individual to expand into universal relations, this is the capital point of all Emerson's lecturing and preaching from 1832 to 1838. In this Emerson is a true disciple, although a very radical one, of Channing.

No one was ever more fond of relations—provided they remained universal—than this man who shunned the narrow limits of sects. Emerson wants to worship and to submit himself to laws—provided they be at the measure of the soul. That explains his defiance of society and church, of reformers and *phalanstères*. He dreads narrowness and fears that any reform will fall short of his high aims. So he remains aloof not for being too little but too much a Transcendentalist. As Professor Gray very aptly remarks (p. 86): "It was not his lack of human sentiment, his aloofness and coldness, that kept Emerson out of the Brook Farm association, but rather the fundamental consistency of his thought."

In fact Emerson's program of reforms is radical. Very far from "not allowing conscience to take any interest in what concerned society," Emerson wants not only the church, but society, politics, art, literature to be rebuilt and renewed by starting from our best and most personal intuition. The soul must enforce its rights in all orders of thought and action. On the basis of a religious revival the world must be redeemed. This is Emerson's creed as it can easily be made out of his Journals from 1826 to 1838 and from his addresses and lectures. As all Transcendentalists, according to Margaret Fuller's saying, Emerson was "a true Utilitarian."

To say that "there was nothing in common between Emerson's purely intellectual religion and the evangelical spiritualism of Channing, Ripley and Parker" is not exact. First be-

cause Emerson's religion, as suggested above, was far from purely intellectual. Even in the form of the Oversoul it contains mystic and intuitive elements. It was Emerson's ambition, with the Christian mystics as his models, to keep religion "equidistant from the hard, sour Puritan on one side, and the empty negation of Rationalism on the other." (Cabot, p. 314). We find moreover in Channing's Unitarian theology, besides a constant reference from faith to reason, many signs of a philosophical deism of the kind Emerson supported.⁴ Only Channing stopped half-way between Transcendentalism and liberal Christianity and his was a sentimental nature.

This Emerson meant when he writes in his Journals that "Channing is intellectual by dint of his fine moral nature, and not primarily." (J. VI, 271)

For Parker there is no doubt. Very far from having nothing in common with Emerson, he never missed an occasion to hail Emerson as his master since the days of the *Divinity school address* which came to Parker like a true revelation. In one of the best characterizations we have of Emerson, Parker himself has answered Professor Girard on this point (*Critical writings* of Theodore Parker II, p. 212). Parker is well aware of a lack of affection in Emerson's religious doctrine. That does not prevent him from rendering Emerson his due. Emerson, according to Parker, is profoundly religious. No writer, in any language, has exerted a more profound religious influence. In his sermon on the *Revival of Religion* (Works III, p. 254 ff.) Parker looks forward to the leader and high priest of the new cult, to him who will put man face to face with infinitude. He finds that man in Emerson. Parker honors the great Unitarian ministers, Chauncey, Mayhew, Buckminster, Channing: "But no living man has done so much as Emerson to waken this religion in the great Saxon heart of the Americans and Britons." To Emerson Parker dedicated his *Ten Sermons on Religion*.

III

Let us arrive at Transcendentalism under its philosophical aspect. Professor Gray's exposition of Emerson's philosophy answers so well Professor Girard's contentions that it will suffice

⁴ A proof of this will be found in the confusion, in most of Channing's sermons, of the christian and philosophical terminology, "Divine Reason," "The Universal Spirit," "Supreme Wisdom," for Channing as for Emerson are synonyms for God or Providence. Channing himself made homage to Price for his custom—which was also Emerson's—of writing with a capital spiritual entities as Love, Right, Duty. See *W. E. Channing* by J. W. Chadwick, p. 42-3.

to refer to it to refute the latter's statement on Emerson's incapacity as a systematic thinker. To deny Transcendentalism as a characteristically philosophical doctrine and exclude Emerson from the movement for not having a system of philosophy, is hardly consistent and is fair neither to Transcendentalism nor to Emerson.

While many of the Transcendentalists saw in the movement mainly a means of broadening the views of liberal Christianity and were content, to that effect, in laying stress on the practical and religious aspects of the doctrine, Emerson wanted to find a philosophical foundation to what was for the people of his time a mere spiritual yearning. To feel and preach the presence of the divine element in the soul and nature is not enough for Emerson. He wants to prove it from what he calls the analogies between the ideal and the real, on the basis of universal symbolism and monism.⁵ So it comes that we find as a foundation of Emerson's Transcendentalism, if not a positive system of metaphysics, at least some very definite and consistent views on the nature of things and the character of knowledge.

As Professor Gray shows in chapter II of his book, to deny Emerson the name of a philosopher is an old quarrel and is not fair to him. It is true that the dialectical side of philosophy did not appeal to Emerson. For him, in the kingdom of philosophy, were many mansions and he would not deny the right of entrance to either Montaigne, Shakespeare or Goethe. If a system of philosophy must primarily be a perfectly consistent, complete and closely connected circle of views, it is hard to refuse Emerson a system. In fact his whole doctrine rests on a few *a priori* principles, a few *ne varientur* postulates around which circle all his thoughts. As to his method, to answer the criticism of which he was well aware, which opposes a poetical to a dialectical exposition of truth, Emerson refers us to Plato for a possibility of blending dialectics and poetry without being unworthy the name of philosopher. What interests Emerson the most in a philosophical system is the intuition at its origin and the moral conclusion at the end. The whole gap between he does not care to fill too closely: "If there is no logic by which these thoughts cohere, the mind itself uttering necessary truth must be their vinculum" (J. II, 392). So he leaves to us the task of connecting his oracles.

That the latter is possible, that Emerson's thoughts coalesce

⁵ The need for such a step was felt by Channing's biographer, Miss Peabody, who wrote that "to understand Dr. Channing's doctrine of love," it took "Mr. Emerson's doctrine of thought." *Reminiscences of W. E. Channing*, pp. 366-7.

along certain lines with an inherent logic can be gathered from Professor Gray's exposition. We can oppose to what Professor Girard calls Emerson's "metaphysical ramblings" a summary of Emerson's Transcendentalism viewed as a theory of Nature and a theory of knowledge.

We have first the symbolism of *Nature*. In that little book of a few readers at first, but soon of enthusiastic admirers, Emerson's philosophy is practically all in the bud. The way in which Emerson points to the spiritual character of the outside world is well known. Nature is steeped in thought. Everything real turns, after all inquiry, to be only another aspect of the spirit. The world is a divine creation projected into the unconscious. That it is only a product of the spirit, that "intellect is primary, matter secondary," that the end of all knowledge is to reduce the world to the mind, is the first and last word of Emerson's Transcendentalism.

We value those views much less for the system itself than for the spiritual fervor which they betray in Emerson. As he will state later on, in his lecture on *the Transcendentalist*, Transcendentalism is an excess of faith. We see in *Nature* Emerson's self-satisfied indifference to the problem of the existence of external reality which he dismisses offhand to turn to idealism as to a dogma. Through all his writings we feel the same pride Emerson takes in assuming a priori the idealistic attitude. This is the very essence of his Transcendentalism.

The second step in Emerson's metaphysics is his theory of evolution. Emerson's Transcendentalism is "a doctrine of degree," from symbolism to idealism, from first sight to insight. Emerson's view of the world is a doctrine of relations and analogies linked on an ascending plane. Starting from symbolism and the ideal-real, we climb the platonic scale with new vistas and prospects opening before us. It was Emerson's habit, as a philosopher and a poet, to fuse the spiritual and the real which puts him on the track of a theory of evolution. Emerson was well aware of certain dualism between mind and matter. He sometimes feared that science would give the lie to poetry. That made him turn to Lamarck, Cuvier and Goethe to help Plato to carry the world forward to spirituality. (See Journals I, 356, 379; II, 351; III, 161; IV, 21, 28, 116)

Emerson's doctrine of evolution was poetical and ethical, a conception of the mind to better reconcile the *one* and the *many*. Divine emanation and evolution were not contradictory doctrines for Emerson. He saw in them two connected aspects, two continuous phases within the circle of the Over-

soul. "There is no end in nature, and every end is a beginning." (*See Circles*, Essays I). On this point, once more, as shown by Professor Gray (chapter IV), the mystic in Emerson helps the philosopher to solve his problems.

At the top of the scale we find the Oversoul and Emerson's absolute idealism as indicated in the last chapters of *Nature*, "Idealism," "Spirit," "Prospects."

The originality of Emerson on this point is the way in which he pushes evolution on a progressively higher plane. Neither on the religious, moral, poetical nor scientific plane does he halt. To think on ever higher grounds is the inner bend of his mind. To reach the heights of Transcendentalism, Emerson does not use a positive and explicit method but he relies on the experience acquired at a lower stage. "Each natural thing has its translation . . . through humanity . . . into the spiritual . . . and to their ends all things continually ascend." (IV 11). Emerson is impressed by that force of attraction upward which raises things to a higher level, as poetry, science and ethics show it. Emerson explains it as an inherent necessity, Transcendentalism being of the very nature of things.

In the mind finally the world is absorbed. Passing from the real to the spiritual we have travelled the whole circle. The mind is supreme, it is first and last. The last word of Emerson's philosophy is the communion with the *Oversoul*, that somewhat impassive and abstract deity of New England transcendental religion, made by Emerson to his own likeness and resemblance.

Here the mystic leaves the philosopher and the poet. Emerson adores "the blessed Unity," the *One* to whom he found access through the *many*, at the end of his platonic and transcendental journey.

IV

We come now to Emerson's transcendental theory of knowledge. That for Emerson Transcendentalism is an attribute of the mind and of the very essence of thought, can be deduced from his system of logic. Very early we see Emerson intent to frame a theory of spiritual perception as worked out, though incompletely, in his *Natural history of Intellect*. Coleridge put him on the way with his distinction between Understanding and Reason of which the Transcendentalists made so much.

Intellect is for Emerson the chief transcendental faculty. Intellect is reason on the plan of active and actual thinking. Of its nature it is transcendental. Concentration and expan-

sion are the two modes of its activities. Intellect is "the power of carrying every fact to successive platforms and of disclosing in every fact a germ of expansion," expansions being "of the very essence of thought." Intellect is the power to see the two sides and the many sides of things, to reduce them to unity. Intellect "detaches." Out of the field of results, of practical and selfish ends, it presents ideas as independent objects for contemplation.⁶

We cannot read Emerson's *Celebration of Intellect* nor his essay on Plato without detecting Emerson's liking for pure intellectuality. For him "the intellectual is the only reality."

To conclude from this Emerson's heartless rationalism, as Professor Girard does, is however to ignore Emerson's definition of Reason as of an intuitive faculty. Nothing can be farther from the truth than the statement that "Emerson did not allow reason to take any interest in the affairs of the heart." (p. 395, note 4). No one ever insisted more than Emerson on the unity and coherence essential to thought nor on that idea that, to come to truth, it takes the whole soul working in accordance with the whole of nature. Emerson places a special emphasis on the necessity of respecting the organic, the natural growth and development of the mind, a topic familiar to other Transcendentalists like Alcott and which Emerson found discussed in a little book very dear to him, "*The growth of the mind*," by his Swedenborgian friend Sampson Reed. For Emerson, as for our modern intuitionists, instinct and intuition are at the base of knowledge. Emerson insisted on the interrelation between intelligence and sensibility when he wrote: "so much love, so much perception," "the best mind is the most impressionable," "genius is a delicate sensibility to the laws of the world," "the conduct of Intellect must respect nothing so much as preserving the sensibility."

Statements like those explain Emerson's confusion of the philosophical and the poetical order. They show that his rationalism was all permeated with sentiment. That to solve the contradictions inherent to Emerson's discussion of philosophical problems we need constantly refer from philosophy to mysticism, from understanding to reason, that, in last analysis, Emerson's philosophy centers and also ends in his mystical doctrine of the Oversoul, is the chief point of Professor Gray's thesis and goes once more against the theory of Emerson's heartless intellectuality. (See in particular Professor Gray's chapter VII, *Theory of Intuition*).

⁶ In its highest form Intellect becomes *poetical reason*, which, out of the realm of morals and utility, takes us to that of "gaie science" as one finds it at play in Emerson's own *Poems*.

To challenge Emerson's position as a leader of American Transcendentalism seems after all suicidal. Were it not for Emerson's writings, New England Transcendentalism would be as good as forgotten for us. For three quarters of a century Emerson's personality and writings have become so well fused with Transcendentalism that to attempt to dissociate them today is a vain task. The following we grant to Professor Girard concerning Emerson, that Transcendentalism has been many things, that it begins with a disintegration within orthodox Unitarianism (a phase represented by Channing), that, in bringing religion to more human and rational views there have been many steps. There are those, like Brownson, and Ripley, who thought possible an alliance between spiritualism, French and German, and Christianity and those, like Emerson, who gave up the whole of Christianity to worship the Oversoul. As in every new movement Transcendentalism, as well as Unitarianism, had a right and a left wing, conservatives and radicals, Tories and Whigs, of the last of whom Emerson was the most prominent and the leader.

To oppose Channing and Emerson is, after all, a vain quarrel. A limited and fixed standard to define the Transcendentalist never existed and we get a much clearer idea of the movement by broadening than by narrowing its definition. If Transcendentalism blossomed in Channing, only with Emerson did it bear fruits and reap its harvests.